

# *Gloating with the Shepherd*

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## Psalm 23

*“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;”*

### *Movement 1 – The Power of the ‘Good Shepherd’*

We all love the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. There is something soothing about that Psalm; it is comforting, and just wonderful to hear. We love the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. It is one of those passages from scripture that has seeped into our cultural psyche. We hear it used in movies, plays and in civic events. The biblical scholar Bill Holladay refers to the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm as, “an American Secular Icon,” when he considers how much it is a part of our own societal ethos. It is a Psalm that we expect to hear during difficult troubles for a source of comfort. It is a Psalm we turn to in times of crisis for a source of hope. It is a Psalm we look to in times when life is too difficult and we need assurance. Even if we don’t really think about the words themselves, just knowing that someone is actually reading or reciting the Psalm brings about some sort of comfort.

If you were at a funeral, you would notice the change in the mood of the grieving when you say the words, “The Lord is my shepherd...” You can see the people’s shoulders drop and tears begin to fall. It is almost as if the Psalm gives people permission to cry. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is a security blanket, and we wrap ourselves up in those words, we allow the words to embrace us, and sooth us. The grieving family, the individual going into surgery, the family that is moving, the couple in crisis can turn to this Psalm, and find comfort, just in hearing and saying it.

It is the Psalm many have memorized even if they are not a part of a church. It is a Psalm that galvanizes the hearts and spirits of nations and families and individuals. It is a part of our culture and our lives. We all love the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.

### *Movement 2 – We Have Lived the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm*

We love the Psalm because we have lived the Psalm. We have experienced the hand of the Lord, the good shepherd, leading us and guiding us. We have experienced the presence of God in the joy of the green pasture and in the dangers of the darkness. We can say, “even though I walk through the valley of darkness, you are with me,” because we have walked through that valley, we have been in times of trouble, times of distress and we can look back and know that God was indeed with us.

When we read this Psalm we are moved to remember, reflect, and celebrate the ways in which God has been active and has been the shepherd in our lives. The Psalm is calling us to live, experience, and share that kind of memory of God’s salvation. It is what the theologian Johann Baptist Metz refers to as a narrative memory – it is a memory that looks back to times of trouble and sees how God was active in your life. Maybe today you are standing on firm ground. Maybe you can look around now, and see good things; the blessings you have in life. You experience the lush green pasture with safety and security. You experience that cool, cold water of the Lord that brings so much refreshment. Maybe today you are on firm ground, but you remember what God has done for you, how God has been a shepherd for you in the past.

Yet maybe at the same time, you remember a difficult time of the past; the time you did indeed journey through the valley of darkness. You remember what it was like to take your family from your home and out of your country so you would be safe. You remember what it was like when you were living with an abusive spouse, and you feared for yourself and your children. You remember what it was like when you lost your job and you wondered how you would care for your family. You remember what it was like when you found out that you were diagnosed with cancer. You remember what it was like when this church was struggling to understand itself as a

church. You remember what it was like when you woke up every morning to danger and wondered where you would face violence today. You remember the difficult times, the times when you were walking through the valley of darkness.

Maybe you are still there today. Maybe you are still walking through the valley of darkness and you can give a witness to the power of God's guiding hand even in the difficult times. Maybe you are in that valley or maybe you have just found your way out of the valley. Either way, we are linked to the Psalm.

Just as we remember the anniversary of Chernobyl, just as we share stories of the Great Depression, and just as we share stories of 9/11, we can look back and see the ways in which God was indeed involved in our lives. We can look back and see how this Psalm connects us with a specific story in our lives. We can look back and see the ways in which God has stayed with your life through the lay-off, through the time of unemployment and into the green pasture you are now experiencing. We can look back and see the ways God has guided this church through the narrow places to the pasture we now experience.

We can remember the Israelites in captivity in Egypt and then freed by the actions of God. We can remember the Israelites backed up against the Red Sea with the Egyptians nipping at their heels, and then liberated. We can remember them trying to find hope and sustenance in the wilderness and then cared for. We can look and see that the bread and manna, the food and water for the Israelites, which the Good Shepherd, brings to them in the wilderness. We can remember the times when we wanted to cry out the beginning of Psalm 22, "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me," and see how we have been brought to Psalm 23. When we read this Psalm we look in a mirror reflecting on our past and see the ways in which God has been a part of our lives, especially in the difficult times. God has been our shepherd. God has delivered us and saved us. It is our story today, which we celebrate and share. Maybe that is part of the reason we love this Psalm so much, because we live this Psalm so much and the story is real for each of us.

### *Movement 3 – Our Current Hope*

And we look forward to sitting at that heavenly table. When we look back at the ways that God has led us through the difficulties of the past then we can look forward to the future promise of this Gospel – that heavenly table. We have lived and are living the Psalm. We know that we are being led to that banquet table. We are going to be in the house of the Lord. We look forward to sitting at that heavenly table, for God has saved us and God is still saving us.

We can be so bold as to expect our cup to overflow. We can be so audacious as to look for that table set and before us. We can be so impetuous as to look for that heavenly table here now. We have lived the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm and we are living the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm and we anticipate where the shepherd will lead us. It is like we are at that moment just before the concert begins and we are waiting for the first note to sound and share the glory we expect. It is like we have been watching our team playing and it is 42 to 0 and we know that our team is going to win, but we are just waiting for the final buzzer, the final shot, the final second so we can savor the victory. It is like setting up the dominoes, stack by stack, one after another, and we know that there will be a time when will push them over and relish in the sounds and sights of falling dominoes. We know it is coming. We know that we will one day be at that banquet table and it will be amazing. This isn't reclaiming the glory of the past, but knowing the glory of tomorrow. Tomorrow this church will shine as a community of Christians bringing Christ to the world. Tomorrow you will shine as a child of God who is cared for in the world. We can look into the horizon and we see the rays of hope shining through. There will be a day; a glorious day, when our cup will overflow and we will be in the presence of the Lord! There will be a day when our bellies will be full, when our minds will be at ease, and when the stirring in our lives will be calmed. There will be a day when we will experience the banquet of the Lord.

I think of Moses leading the Israelites, guiding them through the wilderness. And God took Moses to a high place and let him look off into the new and Promised Land. With his own eyes Moses could see and taste the promise and the future God had for the Israelites. We have seen it, we are told about it in the Psalm, and maybe we have even tasted that glorious banquet which God prepares for us.

This Psalm is not just a Psalm of the past but one that offers a hope for the future. It is not just a Psalm of

what God has done, but a Psalm of what God is doing and what God will do. It is a hope that Jürgen Moltmann claims carries us into the tomorrows, a hope for today based upon the promised actions of God in tomorrow. It is a hope that gives us courage today. We can see the table. We can taste the food and we know that there will be a day when we will sit at that heavenly table.

*Movement 4 – Gloating with the Shepherd?*

Yet in this Psalm, something seems odd about the table. There is something about this table that I find a little bit unsettling. We are still in the presence of our enemies. We are still surrounded by troubles. We are still threatened. We are still in an unsafe place. This isn't a glory of the end-times when all have turned to Christ. This isn't a glory of the final day when God's kingdom is the kingdom of the land. This is a table that we can find today and tomorrow without much changing in the world around us. There is something different, unsettling and maybe odd about this table.

We would assume that the place where God leads us would be free of any threats or dangers. We would assume that the place where God gives us an overflowing cup would be a place where we would not have to watch our back or be reminded of the difficulties we have walked through. It is like God has heard our cry from the hardships of making ends meet, God has taken us through the financial troubles, but sets a table in the presence of all of our loan officers and bankers and collection services. What are we to think about this table? How are we to act when we are brought to this table by the good shepherd? There is something different, unsettling and odd about this table.

Maybe we should gloat. Maybe we should rub it in their faces that we have received God's protection. Like the little dog hiding behind the big dog in the *Tom and Jerry* cartoons. The little dog is chased, the little dog is bullied, but then his friend the big dog shows up, and everyone backs down. And the little dog gloats. The little dog finds much glee, peering behind the legs of the big dog inviting the bulling to continue because now the little dog is safe and secure. Is that how we are to be when we get to the table? Are we to turn to the one who made our life difficult and say, "Look at me now!" Are we to peer from behind God's rod and staff and gloat? Are we brought to this table so that we can be in a place where we can be gloating with the shepherd?

I wonder about the kind of witness we will be portraying when we are at the table, gloating with the shepherd. I wonder about this because we tend to do it. We want to go and brag when we receive something good. We want to go and brag when we win. We want to go and brag when God's blessings shower upon us. The Lord is our shepherd who takes care of us, who tends to our needs and we want to shove it in the face of our naysayer. I wonder about that kind of witness to the world, or if that is the witness many see. I hear from many that Christians are these judgmental, self-righteous, holier-than-thou kinds of people who always feel as if they are better. Christians are often seen as people gloating with the shepherd.

On the other hand, maybe some of you see a different kind of scenario. Maybe you have been led by God, maybe you find yourself at the table, but you are scared to leave because you enemies are still around you. You want to bury yourself into this happy place so you will not have to deal with the horrors and the trials confronting you. Maybe you aren't gloating with the shepherd but cowering with the shepherd. Maybe you would rather put up walls around the table, maybe you would rather put duct tape on all the windows, and maybe you would rather seal all the entrances and exits so that you will not have to face the troubles, the burdens and the worries of the world on your own. Maybe you look out from the table and find yourself scared. God gave you a good day today, but tomorrow you have to go back to work. God brought you through surgery, but tomorrow you will have to go to rehab. The table is good, the table is bliss, but it is still in the presence of our enemies. I remember when I was in a Soup Kitchen in Albany and two of the clients began to exchange some unpleasant words. One of the workers broke up the unpleasant exchanges and reminded them that any violence would lead to expulsion from the meal. She made the place safe, but one of the men went outside, had his friends wait at all the doors and warned the other man that they would be waiting for him. He couldn't stay in the safe place forever. Reality is still before me, and I don't like it.

Do you see why I am stuck with the table? Our enemies are still there. Paradise is not complete; yet we are at the table with the Lord. Can you understand why it is that I find the table a little out of place? It is challenging

and it is troubling.

### *Movement 5 – The Christian Shepherd*

What if we understand the shepherd to be Christ? What if we look at the table and sitting there, inviting us, holding up our cup overflowing with juice is Christ? Can we hear the Psalm in that context? Can we see Christ leading us? Augustine makes just this suggestion; Augustine claims that the shepherd is indeed Christ. He says that when you are led to the cool waters, it is the waters of baptism flowing over you and your sustenance is the live you receive through Christ, because Christ is that good shepherd. Can you imagine the table as set by Christ? Can you imagine that the shepherd is Christ?

So much changes with the table when we see that it is Christ who sets it. The whole purpose of the table can change when it is set by Christ. Remember that Christ did not gloat. He did not come back from the grave to wag his finger at us and say, “I told you so.” He came back from the grave to offer hope, to offer forgiveness and to offer grace. Christ did not preach about gloating at our enemies, but sharing with them, loving them and taking care of them. I can see Christ inviting us to the table, but then challenging us to turn and invite those very people who are around us. I remember when I was working at a summer camp, and every year there was at least one kid that was a complete pest. That child caused trouble, that child talked back, and that child was always where he was not supposed to be. I found myself praying the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm to find hope with this child, and to find God guiding me through the difficult places. Every week I would find a place where I could find rest, peace, and renewal. I would go to a table by myself to regroup, and leave the child with someone else. Then one summer I realized that I was not reaching out to the child. I was running away from the child, and was trying to find that heavenly banquet, even if it was just for a moment, for my own private sanctuary. I read the gospels, I remembered Christ reaching out to the outcast, to the oppressed, to the marginalized, to the annoying and to the ones who were put on the outside. I remembered the story of the Good Samaritan, when Jesus suggests that the neighbor we are supposed to take care of is the one who we may consider our enemy. I remembered this, and felt shame, guilt and sorrow. I was in the presence of my trouble, in a place of peace and rest, and I turned my back on the very one who needed to sit with Jesus just as much as I did.

How often do we go to the church to escape from the world? How often do we turn to prayer to escape an individual? How often do we run from the arms of the annoying to the arms of God hoping for some kind of peace and sanctuary? Yet if we understand that it is Christ who calls us to the table. If we understand that it is Christ who is our good shepherd, then can we understand that we are to reach out and invite others to our table? Because I think this is the challenge Christ would offer to us. Christ has taken care of us, and will continue to take care of us, but we are not to gloat or hide in the presence of the Lord, but invite others to come and experience and know the glory that we know through Christ. When we understand the Psalm with Christ as the royal shepherd, the good shepherd, the holy shepherd than we can understand the table in a very different way.

### *Movement 6 – The Bold Hope of the Shepherd’s Supper*

We are at the Lord’s Table surrounded by our troubles and our enemies. We now need to turn our chairs around, reach out, and bring them in. We need to offer a place at the table for our enemies. We are in the presence of our enemies, but we will not be for long when we invite them to the table. Can you see yourself doing that? Can you call the one with whom you have friction and invite them to sit and worship at your side? Can you reach out to the one who scares you and invite them to join you in prayer? Can you go and visit the one who disagrees with you at every opportunity and bring them communion? Can you reach out to your enemies from the presence of Christ and invite them to the table.

For the table is indeed a place of reconciliation. The table is a place where everyone has something and greed goes away. The table is a place where forgiveness flows freely through the body of Christ. Such power of the Lord’s Table was shown in the movie *Babbett’s Feast*. In this movie, a town that lived with deep-set arguments and disagreements was brought unknowingly to the table of one of the best cooks from France. They ate and laughed, and shared, and cried, and forgave, and left a new community, a renewed community, and a community made whole. The same thing can happen when we gather around the table with our enemies.

When we gather around the table we can share our faults, our sins, and our misgivings. When we gather

around the table we can learn about each other, we can care for each other, and we can experience the Lord with each other. Now it may be risky, it may be scary, and it may seem dangerous to reach out to your enemies, to reach out to the burdens of our society and our culture and to reach out to the ones who seem to bring no hope, but the Lord, Christ, the shepherd will be with you. The Lord will be with you when you go into the by-ways of poverty for the sake of the shepherd. The Lord will lead you to the green pastures, to the cool waters, and to the banquet table. Take a risk and rest on the Lord. Take a chance and let Christ guide you. My brothers and sisters, Christ will stay with us, Christ will guide us, and bring us to safety. This psalm is and will always be for us. Yet we cannot leave the world, for Christ brings us to the world and asks you and me, will you reach out? Will you invite, and will you challenge those who still do not know the bliss and the joy of being able to say, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want?” Then we will be at the table in the presence of our enemies, but they will become our friends, our fellowship, our brothers and sisters in Christ. The Lord is my shepherd, and also yours; let us share the peace of Christ with the entire world.

AMEN